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The Taste of the Sun: Okra Soup in the Geechee Tradition

Author(s): Kendra Hamilton

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## THE TASTE OF THE SUN

### Okra Soup in the Geechee Tradition

by Kendra Hamilton

When most folks think “gumbo,” they think “Louisiana.” They think dark, rich roux and fiery spice. McIlhenny’s or Crystal or Louisiana Hot Sauce on the table. Toothache-sweet tea. Blues on the jukebox. Louisiana.

Well, having lived many years in Louisiana, having, in fact, loved the state and the people and learned to cook a mighty mean gumbo there myself, it nevertheless never ceases to annoy me that there’s no similar range of associations for the gumbo I grew up on in Charleston, South Carolina—the gumbo that we called *okra soup*.

So I want to tell you about okra soup and, in the telling, you’ll get just a taste of the heritage of us Geechee folk—sometimes called Gullahs.

We Geechees were planted here in the Low Country like seed nearly 400 years ago. As kidnapped citizens of many African nations, our ancestors traveled with the Spanish in the 1500s, with the English in the 1600s, with Americans from great sailing ports in Massachusetts and Rhode Island in the 1700s and 1800s. Some of us came by way of the Caribbean—some direct from Africa. By whatever route, the massive movement of men and women included rice-eating Golas from Liberia as well as Angolans from the Congo and Angola. Either or, more likely, both could have served as the origin of the word Gullah. And there were also Kissi and Giggi from Sierra Leone—who may have given their names to us Geechees.<sup>1</sup>

Like seed in a garden, we naturalized—so efficiently that, in 1970, it was estimated that one-quarter of the native-born black population of the United States was descended from enslaved Africans who landed at the Low Country port of Charleston.<sup>2</sup> But the knowledge of our roots is limited. The memory of our ways and the knowledge of our elders is fading—will surely fade and vanish forever from the earth unless we share our stories as we share the flavors of delicious but underappreciated dishes like okra soup.

It’s been thirty years since I lived in the Low Country. And I use that name deliberately. The National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Congressman James Clyburn have given us the more socially accurate designation “Gullah/Geechee coast,” and conscious folks on all sides of the color line bless them for it. But geography matters, too, and time out of mind, “Low Country” has been the people’s name for the coastal plain from Cape Fear, North Carolina, to the mouth of the St. John River in Jacksonville, Florida.

It is literally low country: flat, semitropical, studded with live oaks, cypress, and pines, supplejack, smilax, and fragrant vines. It’s a land crisscrossed by meandering rivers, by salt

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## C A L L A L O O

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marshes teeming with wildlife, and now—since the building boom that followed Hurricane Hugo—crosshatched by mile upon mile of suburban sprawl belching forth the occasional town or multimillion-dollar resort development, all in a headlong march to the sea.

I'm old enough to remember a very different Low Country and, since I left so long ago, that Low Country exists almost as a separate country that I love to visit in reverie. This Low Country was, in the 1960s, almost entirely rural except for the big cities of Savannah and Charleston. And black folks or Geechees, as we called ourselves (I never heard the word Gullah till I was an adult, though, of course, I heard Gullah spoken every day), were only just beginning to spill out from the borders of the city and from the freedman's settlements purchased just after Emancipation that were scattered all about the rural areas of the county.

In Charleston, those settlements were oriented almost entirely around rivers. East of the Cooper River (known to the Indians as the Etiwan), the settlements had names like Cain Hoy, Remley's Point, Phillips, and Snowden (pronounced as *ow* as in *chow*, rather than *oh* as in *snow*). West of the Ashley or the "Kiowah" River—in fact, right on its banks—were Maryville and Ashleyville. To the north, in the wedge of land between the rivers, were Silver Hill and Accabee, Union Heights and Liberty Hill, the ancestral stomping grounds of my kin among the Hamiltons, Desaussures, Halls, and Bradleys. Lincolnville was to the far north, near the one-time white folks' resort of Summerville.

If culture is indeed the way humans solve the problems of adapting to the environment and living together, then okra soup is certainly the product of the people and their environment. One has only to consider the list of ingredients to see that.

It's always served over the rice that my ancestors were kidnapped away from their West African homes to grow. The main ingredient is the okra (*nkru-ma* in Ghanaian Twi), also called gumbo (*kigombo* in Angolan Bantu), that came along for the ride.

To the rice and okra, long-ago cooks added the wild onions, fresh or dry lima beans, and more rarely the corn borrowed from the Native American succotashes that they found on their arrival in the New World. Lastly, they added the tomatoes, native to Peru but cultivated in South Carolina since at least the seventeenth century, that all three peoples—Africans, Indians, and Europeans—loved.

My nostalgia for *this* Low Country, the polyglot multicultured land that I've constructed in re-memory just to my liking, is only fed by my quarterly visits to the physical place, much sadder and far more mono-hued, where the newspapers are full of stories of brown people selling or being forced out of lands they've worked or owned one way or another for nearly 500 years (if you count the Africans who arrived with the Spanish), where the now-majority whites have created a paradise of "faux historic" suburbs and golf courses to poison the marshes and streams.

Okra soup is a small point in this conflict between exalted ideal and fallen real—yet I think it's a telling one.

I always crave okra soup when I go home to Charleston. It's a craving that can hit immediately: the moment I step off the plane onto the sweltering tarmac and take my first breath of the marsh-scented air. But it's a craving that's surprisingly difficult to satisfy.

Charleston is, of course, a great center of Low Country cuisine. But while all kinds of dishes of the common people — traditional perlous and kedgees and even that New

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## C A L L A L O O

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Year's favorite, Hoppin' John—have made their way to restaurant kitchens without undue violence to the flavors of the originals, humble, delicious okra soup has not. It's still largely the province of the home kitchen . . . and regrettably, no longer *my* home kitchen.

My mother, now that she's reached her seventies, has finally become liberated. And I, her feminist daughter, celebrate this—though I think I'd celebrate it a bit more enthusiastically if she'd become liberated from things like, say, ironing my father's shirts till they can stand and salute on their own instead of from things like her kitchen and the marvelous dishes, like the truly tasty okra soup, that used to emerge from it.

And there's no appeal to the other legendary cooks of my family—Anna Hall Hamilton, my grandmother, and my aunts (really my father's first cousins), Ada Bradley Douglas and LaVonna Bradley Boone, who all went home to the ancestors nearly a decade ago.

So what's a Geechee girl do when the okra soup craving hits? Well, unless she's of a mind to start shopping and chopping, she suffers the tender mercies of a few—tragically few—restaurants where, every year, the people serving seem to know less about the food.

Case in point.

I went home in June for a consulting job and decided to check out the performances at the annual Spoleto Festival USA. The craving hit, virtually in the middle of a chamber music concert, and so I stopped in at Jestine's, just blocks from the main festival venue, hoping to satisfy it.

Now Jestine's *sounds* like a place where the folks would know a thing or two about okra soup. But it's a place I patronize only reluctantly because it's not quite, in my opinion, an authentic soul food restaurant. That is to say, it's not named for the black woman who owns it, like Alice's on King was. Instead, it's named for the black *maid* of the white *grandma* of the family that owns it—soul at a pretty distant remove.

When Alice's was around, I wouldn't have been caught dead inside Jestine's—and neither would many other homegrown Charlestonians, whether black or white. We mostly left Jestine's to the tourists and made the trip uptown, to Alice's located in a once solidly black commercial district on King Street—where the fish and the chicken, smothered and fried, and the ribs and, yes, the okra soup were absolutely slammin'.

But then came that sad day, four or five years ago, when Alice shuttered her windows and doors—the street saying it was because Alice had a boyfriend, and the boyfriend had too much say about what Alice did with her money . . .

So I turned to Hyman's, a seafood place where, despite its popularity with tourists, the owners are in their fifth generation and the chef seemed to have a clue. The shrimp creole, for example, was Low Country, not Louisiana: okra and tomatoes (more on this dish later) with a generous helping of shrimp added to the mix. (They also had a little thing called the "oyster shooter," a Bloody Mary drink with an oyster shucked in the bottom of the shot glass, but that's a story for another day.)

Then Hyman's failed me—new chef, watery undercooked okra—so I *finally* turned to Jestine's and, for two or three visits, found a perfectly serviceable bowl of okra soup there . . . But not on this trip.

On this visit, I perused the menu, saw the words "okra gumbo," and immediately got an attitude. Now admittedly, I was sweating and sticky from the heat and humidity outdoors. I was also hungry and, therefore, cranky . . . but, "okra gumbo"?

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## C A L L A L O O

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Geechee folk tend to say either that they're having "okra soup" for dinner—or they're having "gumbo." This is by no means universally true, but folks don't tend to talk about the "okra gumbo" they're cooking. I think that's because "gumbo" means "okra" and, even if the conscious memory of that has faded, the unconscious knows that saying you're having "okra gumbo" is redundant, like saying you're having "okra okra."

But I repressed my inner teacher and when the waitress asked me for my order, I told her I wanted "fried chicken and, instead of two vegetables, a double order of okra soup served over rice."

Now, such an order would have been perfectly intelligible to any person of Gullah or Geechee descent, or to any white person with roots more than two generations deep in the Low Country. Okra soup is, after all, the correct term; for dinner it's usually served with a main course meat; and it's *always* served over rice.

Not to my waitress—my pretty, petite African American waitress. She looked at me, for all the world like a chocolate-dipped Barbie doll, in what I imagine male tourists found to be an adorable confusion.

"We have . . . okra gumbo," she finally said, "and it has sausage in it and I guess it's like a soup." She ended on a rising inflection that was not quite a question.

I sighed. I was, after all, hungry and cross, and if I explained about "okra" and "gumbo," it'd just prolong a painful process.

"I'll have that," I said.

When it arrived, it was, as she had promised, generously sprinkled with bits of what appeared to be Hillshire Farm polska kielbasa. About "zero" on the authentic meter. It was also "like a soup." But this was a watery mess of canned tomatoes and undercooked okra with some dried parsley floating in it—it was not in the least like the okra soup that I was craving.

I ate it anyway. But with every bite, I was muttering to myself, "Not even fresh okra . . ."

The key to making an okra soup that is flavorful and authentic, in the tradition of the South Carolina Geechee, is simplicity itself: it lies in remaining true to the ingredients, remaining ever mindful of the fact that okra soup is a dish of summer.

This is something that was instinctual knowledge for the ancestors, something that erstwhile hippies like Alice Waters have turned into multimillions of dollars and a movement, but that far too many—especially in the South, a land of once-fabular fertility—have utterly lost a taste and feel for. Only with an effort in this postmodern age do we bring ourselves to think of foods in terms of seasons.

It could hardly be otherwise, I suppose, with so many billions of dollars devoted to denaturing our connection to the foods we eat. But last year, for the very first time, I grew okra and tomatoes in combination and discovered for myself the profound and elemental pleasures of slow food.

By this I mean simply food one has to wait for: a longing fixed into one's chosen patch of earth with a seed.

I should explain that last year's garden represented a rebirth for me. I was recovering from a serious illness, and then a brutally invasive and painful surgery to correct it. I had lived for eight months in a cast boot, haunted by the fear that I might never walk normally

## C A L L A L O O

again. As that fear and the pain faded, but long before I recovered my lost strength and agility, I began long for a garden—specifically, to sink my fingers in soil, to root my toes, to anchor myself to the earth—and I longed for these things with the same intensity that I used to long for a child.

Mind you, I could barely stand for five minutes on end. I couldn't squat at all. But two dear friends, a husband and wife with a greenhouse and a passion to match my own, offered shovels, a truckful of compost, and long day of laughing labor to prepare my beds. I blessed them.

And I began to plant.

Six varieties of tomatoes: yellow and black plums, Brandywines, oxhearts, yellow pears, cherries. Five varieties of peppers: sweet bells, mildly hot bananas, chocolate brown "mulato islenos," fiery hot jalapenos, and serranos. I learned to stand for longer periods, tested the bend in my stiff and swollen ankle. I planted yellow crookneck squash, cucumbers, eggplant, garlic, a wild profusion of herbs . . .

And I tried something new: *Hibiscus esculentus* 'Clemson Spineless.' Humble, delicious South Carolina okra.

I planted four from seed and watched as each one shot from a single leaf the size of my thumbnail to a height of six feet, then burst into a mad efflorescence of papery, pale yellow blooms in a mere matter of weeks. The sound of their palmate leaves rustling in the breeze taught me a new language of love. The spectacle of their metamorphosis—of the petals fading and falling, then the ovaries lengthening, fattening, ripening to a size suitable for my skillet—well, this was a new definition for desire.

My okra and tomato plants began to bear at roughly the same time. In June the earliest tomatoes completed their journey from green to gold to orange-red and the tender pods of my okra plants achieved the exact length and breadth of a lady's finger.

So I made soup.

And this is how I learned that the beau ideal of okra soup can only be achieved in one way: using the freshest of local ingredients, in season.

That means no bagged, frozen okra from Bird's Eye—but picked at the sublime height of their buttery tenderness, as little as two days after the pods begin to form. That means no waxen tomatoes fresh off the container ship from Chile—but ones that have ripened on the vine, then been picked, scalded, peeled, their still-warm flesh crushed by hand (OK, I'll allow a food mill) into homemade paste.

Okra soup is like the blues. The blues has a standard harmonic form that never changes, that provides comfort and predictability, but there's infinite variation—down-home, boogie-woogie, jump, Piedmont, Chicago—withn the form.

In my grandmother's kitchen, tender oxtails gave the tomatoes a dark, deliciously beefy savor. At the moment I'm re-memorizing, the lights in that kitchen are low. There's bread pudding cooling in a baking pan on the stove, hunks of homemade liver pudding in a plate on the kitchen table, jars of homemade wine I'm not old enough to taste in the pantry. And when she's ready to feed me, she'll ladle the okra soup over mounds of the gummy, short-grain rice my father still loves.

Then there's Vonna—"Lord, that woman could cook," my father's litany at every mention of her name. At the moment I'm recalling, I'd come home for a funeral—Vonna's

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## C A L L A L O O

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funeral, as a matter of fact—and her sister Marie had made a pot of the okra soup Vonna most loved, with crab legs, shrimp, *and* a beef bone swimming amid the okra, onions, and tomatoes. The back porch was full of men—Vonna’s in-laws, cousins, and sons, drinking beer and bourbon, laughing to keep their grief at bay. I’m inside talking to the women, respectful, eyes downcast, but careful to ladle a crab leg into my bowl as I talk.

So many women. So many memorable bowls of okra soup.

My best friend at school—Immaculate Conception, an all-black Catholic school, served by a black order of nuns, the Oblate sisters from Baltimore—was Stephanie Thompson, a child of exceptional sweetness who befriended me despite my even then vinegary temperament. Stephanie had a largish family, four kids with lots of cousins and friends (paradise for the lonely only child that I was). When Mr. Thompson managed to move them all from a crowded rental on Romney Street to a spacious double house<sup>3</sup> with an enclosed piazza right off Huger (pronounced *U-gee*)—the street that in 1965 could be considered the heart of black Charleston—the family celebrated the event by instituting a tradition of Sunday dinners.

The dining room table seated eight—a marvel to me with my family of three which never assembled except for Sunday breakfast. And Mabel Thompson, petite and pixieish with a haircut to match, insisted that we watch her cook. It was from Mrs. Thompson that I learned the trick of adding a tablespoon of sugar to tomato dishes to cut their acidity. She always served okra soup as a Sunday, not an every day, dish. It had pride of place in the center of the table next to an enormous bowl of pearl white, long-grain rice. That rice was always perfectly steamed, each grain standing separate from the next. And I was always sorry, looking at that bowl of perfect rice, that my father would have none but the sticky, short-grain kind.

I loved downtown passionately, but I lived far from it in what would soon come to be called the suburbs. Our little neighborhood, called “Jenkins Terrace,” was named after the Jenkins Orphanage, an institution right on the banks of the Ashley River with a legendary marching band. Graduates ended up with bandleaders like Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie—and high school music programs around the state, like my dad, an orphanage band alum who led the band and concert programs at Bonds-Wilson High School. My best friend in “the Terrace” was Sharon Reid, bright, inquisitive, three years older than me and determined that I’d never forget it—but no matter how she snubbed me, I’d always forgive her because her mother, the English teacher at my father’s school, was the best cook in the neighborhood.

To please her husband, Ethel Reid cooked Low Country dishes in the “Bamberg style,” Bamberg being the small town right off the Edisto River from which her husband hailed. Bamberg had some of the richest coon-, rabbit-, and deer-hunting runs to be found this side of Georgia, and Mr. Reid had a pack of fine scent hounds: bluetick, black-and-tan, and redbone coonhounds who moaned and belled and bayed like a doggie opera whenever the wind wafted them the slightest hint of prey. There was always venison in the freezer and on their table. As for Mrs. Reid’s gravies and her okra soup, to this day, I have no idea what she did to make them taste so good.

But as much as I loved all these women, as much of an effort as I put into hurting myself on all their fine cooking—I think I’d still have to say my farm-bred mama’s okra soup was and remains the very best I ever put between my lips. Not because of any exotic

## C A L L A L O O

ingredients or secret techniques—such as sautéing the okra to the correct tenderness before adding it into the soup. My mother's method was simplicity itself. She understood better than any of the other mothers the importance of fresh ingredients.

Mama, I should be clear, was no Geech. She hailed from South Carolina's red clay country, a little town called Ninety-Six where even the black folks talked with an Appalachian twang and the family of nine grew, picked, and canned almost everything they ate. She liked to crumble cornbread in her okra soup, after the fashion of the Upstate, which loved corn every bit as much as we Geechees loved rice. And her habit of slicing fresh, sweet corn into the broth may have come from the Cherokee side of her family.

My mama's okra soup was the ground where the two cultures of South Carolina—Upstate and Low Country—met and married. Happily and deliciously, I might add.

There was always some pork product—a hambone or a smoked neck bone or ham hock—in mama's soup. And it was heavy on fresh vegetables: corn and lima beans, usually from a roadside stand or a truck farm. Occasionally she'd thinly shave a bit of cabbage into her soup—which was in no wise authentically Geechee, but which gave the soup a delicious flavor.

But the great gift my mother imparted to me was her conviction of the absolute necessity for fresh tomatoes. I wish I had a dollar for every day I spent in summer helping her blanch and process tomatoes. She never canned—she seemed to have a vague fear of exploding pressure cookers. In any case, we never had one in the house. But you didn't need a pressure cooker to make freezer tomatoes—not to mention freezer limas, corn, peaches. During all the dismal days of winter, we'd have okra soup and peach cobbler. And every bite had a taste of the sun in it.

I imagine it was this heritage that shaped me into an adult who gardens in a serious way—growing both flowers and the vegetables that I love to eat, especially those that are rare on the grocer's shelves . . . like okra. (Of course, okra.)

It's a good heritage to have. I know that it's my knowledge of gardening and farm culture that gives me an instinctive feeling for some of the elements of the Gullah/Geechee food tradition.

In June, for example, one can have okra soup—or okra and tomatoes. It's a distinction with a difference.

This is how my Geechee grandmother made okra and tomatoes. She took some thick cuts of country-sliced bacon, fried them up crisp, then removed the bacon from the skillet and added about a cup of chopped sweet onions to the fat. (Some of the sweetest were grown right near Charleston, on Wadmalaw Island.)

She'd fry the onions until just transparent, then she'd pour in about a pound of okra, the ends trimmed and the pods cut into small rounds. When the okra started to turn a bright, bright green, she'd add fresh chopped tomatoes and a slice or two of the bacon and simmer it all together. When the okra had cooked down to a dull green and most of the juice from the tomatoes was gone, it was ready to serve. She'd crumble the rest of the bacon over the top, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and serve.

For years, I puzzled over the meats in okra soup. Why, I wondered, did some folks, like the Hamiltons and Bradleys, always use oxtails or a beef bone and only rarely ham, while my mother and some of the neighborhood moms always used ham and never beef?

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## C A L L A L O O

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And what was up with those crab legs?

I think there are a couple of answers.

Just as corn ripens later than lima beans, and limas ripen later than tomatoes, protein has its seasonal rhythms, too. Back in the day, anyone who lived within reach of a river or a creek—and that was basically everybody—knew that the shrimp run began in mid-May, lasting roughly until the following February, and that crabs, for those who wanted them, were available anytime except the coldest months of the year, when they hibernated.

Just as the crabs were going to sleep came hog and cattle killin' time—usually around the holidays. The pork went straight into the smokehouse—the beef, at least until the development of local canneries, and then refrigeration, had to be eaten fresh.

But knowing how chary antebellum planters were of giving their slaves any meat at all, I remained puzzled as to how the preference for beef developed . . . until it finally occurred to me that this could very well represent a distant echo of a past in which the ancestors were God-fearing . . . Muslims.

After all, Peter Wood, Michael Gomez, and others who concern themselves with matters of slave ancestry have long noted that Carolina and Georgia planters expressed a strong preference for slaves from the “Gambia” and “Sierra Leone”—an area that comprises contemporary Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. And those Senegambia tribes tended to be Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

I think of my grandmother, her lifelong devotion to Monrovia United Methodist Church, and wonder what she'd make of my roving speculations.

I'm sure she'd shake her head.

Here I offer my “receipt”—an archaic word I love, that means both “something handed down” and “set of cooking instructions”—for okra soup.

Keep in mind, this is a dish I only make when there is time to do it right. After all, if I'm in a rush, I can have okra and tomatoes from start to finish in less than forty minutes. Okra soup, on the other hand, is at least a four-hour affair. Traditionally, it simmered all day, then was served in the evening over the ubiquitous plate of white rice.

So assuming that you, too, have the luxury of time, I'll start by instructing you in making the richest, the most complex and delicious stock that I can imagine.

Begin with a Dutch oven, a sweet yellow onion, and some cloves of garlic—don't even bother to peel them. Then add couple of carrots, some stalks of celery, a bell pepper, perhaps even one-quarter of a cabbage. For extra flavor, throw in a few bay leaves, or pick some thyme and parsley from the garden, or tie up a tablespoonful of pickling spice in a twist of cheesecloth. Or do all three. If you like fire, throw in a few dried red chili peppers.

Vegetarians can stop right here. But in the tradition, it wasn't soup unless there was a beef or ham bone. My choice is always ham—a ham shank or pork neck bones or ham hocks. (Smoked turkey necks are a great alternative for the swine-averse—the tiny bones make an incredibly smoky, rich stock).

If this is everyday okra soup, you can stop there—cover the whole thing with water and start simmering. But if what you're making is an extra special batch—one with seafood, either for company or because you need a treat—toss in the peelings from shrimp. The heads, too, if you have them. They make for an especially intense flavor—not to mention a lovely pink color.

## C A L L A L O O

Such are the ingredients for the stock—and if it sounds like a grand mess, you are not to worry, because at the end you’re going to toss all the solid ingredients and reserve only the liquid. And this liquid will be so aromatic, so complex that the soup will just explode in your mouth.

Bring the stock to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer it on low for at least two hours to concentrate the flavors. Keep that heat low—you don’t want all the water to evaporate.

Now, two hours may sound like a long time, but—depending on how fancy you’re planning to get with your okra soup—you may need every bit of it to get the rest of the ingredients ready. Fresh, after all, does take longer.

After the stock, you need only three ingredients for classic okra soup: okra, tomatoes, and onions. You’ll need one large onion, coarsely chopped, and three pounds each of tomatoes and okra.

Here’s a secret for peeling fresh tomatoes. If you blanch them in boiling water for one or two minutes, the skin will then split easily under your knife and pull or scrape right off.

Here’s another secret, an even more essential one, for those who are turned off by the “slime” that oozes from our tasty but mucilaginous friend, the okra. To eliminate slime, simply make sure that the pods are thoroughly dry before trimming the ends and chopping them into small rounds. Dry your hands and your knife, too. Water stimulates the production of the slime—which is what makes okra such a great thickener in soups and stews. No water, no slime—at least not until you drop the okra in the pot.

I said above that you only need okra, tomatoes, and onions for okra soup. And that’s quite true. Once the stock is done, you could drop in the vegetable trio, and in a trice you would have okra soup.

But few of the memorable bowls I’ve had have come from quite such a lean and mean tradition. Most families have an array of favored ingredients that they add to or subtract from the mix depending on taste and availability. Sometimes, it’s something as simple as adding chopped celery and bell pepper to the chopped onions. In high summer, there are those who like fresh corn shaved off the cob and tender, early lima beans swimming in their soup.

Sometimes it’s the protein that gives the soup its character. My grandmother poured her stock and fresh ingredients over browned oxtails. My aunts used beef, too, but liked to add crab legs and shrimp at the very end of the cooking process.

Any mix of ingredients can make a fabulous soup.

But one word of warning: Even with a great mix, all your efforts can be undone if the final *consistency* is off.

I’ll explain.

There are those who like a thin soup—I absolutely abhor it. I prefer a stew and better yet a stew that has the consistency almost of a gravy in the way it ladles from the pot and clings to the rice.

A thin consistency, if that’s what you prefer, is a snap to achieve. Just cook the ingredients for two hours and serve over rice.

A thicker consistency, though—that can be tricky. Expert cooks simply add plenty of okra, plenty of meat, and cook the soup carefully, slowly, checking frequently to avoid burning—until the vegetables begin to lose their structure and most of the liquid is gone.

## C A L L A L O O

This is a dangerous method for the beginner, for whom a scorched pot is the most likely result. And then, too, the modern palate, with its preference for vegetables with a bit more “bite,” may find the texture lacking.

There are alternatives.

1. My mother always supplemented her fresh tomatoes with a little four-ounce can of paste. It makes for a more intense tomato flavor, but it doesn’t always make much of a difference in terms of thickness.
2. Old-time cooks with old-fashioned rice steamers would use the starchy water left over in the bottom of the rice pot as a thickener. This is truly an authentic method . . . But of course, you have’d to have an old-fashioned rice steamer among your pots.
3. I’ve seen cooks pull out a little box of Argo cornstarch when faced with this crossroads. I don’t like that method at all—not because of the results, which are excellent if you don’t use too much. It just . . . feels like cheating.
4. I’ve heard tell of folks using filé powder, like the Louisiana cooks. It’s not authentic, but it certainly does the trick.
5. And then there’s what I do . . . though I’m not sure if I’m confessing a sin or a secret (I *have* heard of a few Low Country cooks doing this). I make a white roux of butter and flour, about two tablespoons worth, and add it early in the cooking process. I doubt that white roux is in the tradition—except for the ones who worked in the kitchens, our enslaved ancestors didn’t have a lot of access to white flour. But it makes for a perfect consistency. Not too thick. Not too thin. Just right.

So I think there’s more to say about okra soup, but I don’t know that I’m the woman to say it. My Geechee grandmother was a woman of few words, and I think she’d judge that I’ve said right about enough.

But there is one final thought I’ll leave you with before I close, and that’s a thought about the words “Geechee” and “Gullah.” Most of you who’ve heard the term Gullah probably think you know what it means, and you may be confused by my using the terms somewhat interchangeably. What you’ve probably heard is that Gullah is a creole language that developed among the enslaved Africans who cultivated rice on the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Gullah people, language, and culture are relatively “pure” on those islands, though endangered by coastal development and going the way of many old, cherished things: dying, near about dead.

Well, some of that is right, and some of it is wrong. It’s absolutely true that Gullah was spoken on the sea islands, but it was also spoken by blacks and even whites throughout the Low Country, in the towns as well as the rural areas. Gullah culture is rice culture, certainly, but it’s not solely sea island culture because rice was never grown commercially on the sea islands. Rather, it was grown along the banks of “rice rivers” that drained into the Atlantic, thus maintaining a tidal flow that allowed the inundation and draining of the fields in season.

There were many rice rivers in South Carolina, but seven of them had a particularly storied tradition, and their names make a music like the inhalation and exhalation of the tides: Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Santee, Cooper, Ashley, Edisto, Combahee.<sup>5</sup>

All along these rivers, and the Ogeechee, Altamaha,<sup>6</sup> and Satilla in Georgia and on down into Florida, people grew rice and ate rice, and the language and foodways and folkways some call Gullah and some call Geechee flourished.

## C A L L A L O O

Now, scholars are always trying to tell us Geechee folk who we are. And some of what they say is good information and some of it is nonsense. Would you believe that some woman named Doris Witt, in her book *Black Hunger*, had the gall to tell Vertamae Grosvenor that she wasn't a Geech? Witt's reasoning—1) that Grosvenor was raised in Philly and only spent summers in South Carolina and 2) that Grosvenor's family didn't live on a sea island—could have been chopped apart in two seconds flat by any anthropologist or historian or Geech. But even if it weren't for that, I believe it takes either a mighty load of nerve or an equal measure of ignorance to tell a woman who her own people are. So be careful about what you read—leaven it with a few grains of salty, down-home common sense.

By way of example, here's something else I gleaned from books that I'd advise you to take with about a box of Morton Kosher Salt: some folks theorize that *Gullah* is the word used to refer to the language and people in South Carolina, while *Geechee* is used in Georgia, where there is an Ogeechee River. There is no evidence for the repeated assertion—other than the name of the river. And it makes no attempt to account for the usage among the people who define themselves by those names. I repeat: I never heard the word *Gullah* growing up in Charleston until I was a woman grown. We called ourselves *Geechees*—and folks from North Carolina to New York City called us Geechees, too.

The amateur and professional folklorists who've been writing these books about us since the '20s haven't always taken the time to talk to the people (or more than a handful of people) to find out what we say about ourselves and our culture. That's no longer true, though it's taken a group of public historians working for the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Park Service to make the change.<sup>7</sup>

After sponsoring a massive research study that included a review of the entire written literature and interviews with freedman's communities along a 300-mile stretch of the Atlantic Coast, these institutions have concluded that the "Gullah/Geechee coast" is not as a handful of isolated islands on the edge of vanishing into irrelevance, but an area stretching from North Carolina to Florida reaching 40 miles or better inland for its entire length.

In that territory, we are all Gullahs and Geechees, though a lot of us don't know it, so disembedded and disinherited from own culture have we become, in part by the very language that scholars in the past used to talk about it.

But Gullah and Geechee people are waking up from our long sleep, waking up to who we are and what we've given to the world. Little places like Phillips, near Charleston, are talking to little communities like Harris Neck in Georgia and Eatonville in Florida—and starting to understand our common heritage and our common struggle.

We are planting seeds. Small, black, perfectly round seeds that shoot up six feet high and produce papery pale yellow flowers. With the harvest of fuzzy green pods we make a soup that plants seeds in you. Seeds that turn into stories. Stories planted in you . . . And in you. In you. And you.

### NOTES

1. As early as 1922, the amateur folklorist and ardent segregationist Ambrose E. Gonzales called the origin of these terms a "hopeless conflict." See *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (Columbia, SC: The State Co., 1922) 9. Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago:

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## C A L L A L O O

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- U of Chicago P, 1949), which developed from interviews collected in the 1930s and '40s, was the first work of scholarship to take African ethnicity in the Low Country seriously, as well as to hint at its diversity. But it took more than twenty years for the rest of the academic community to catch up to his insights. Peter Wood's *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1690 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974) reopened the question by asking, for the first time, about the origins of the rice-growing technology that made the Low Country rich. Wood located this technology among specific tribes and specific regions of West Africa, and this determination made other studies possible. Those studies specifically interested in the notion of ethnicity include Margaret Washington Creel's excellent "A Peculiar People": *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York UP, 1988) 15–19; Michael A. Gomez's indispensable *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) 102; William S. Pollitzer's somewhat problematic *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (U of Georgia P, 1999) 46.
2. W. Robert Higgins, "Charleston: Terminus and Entrepot of the Colonial Trade," *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays*, eds. Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rothberg (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970) 118.
  3. The distinctive architectural styles of Charleston include the "single" house and the "double" house, both oriented to take advantage of prevailing breezes in semi-tropical and tropical climates, both derived from antecedents in Barbados, from which many of the original Charleston colonists, enslaved and free, hailed. Books on the city's architecture proliferate, but Jonathan Poston's *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1997) is a comprehensive source.
  4. See the first note for a full explanation of the background of the thriving field of research into slave ethnicity. Gomez has the most comprehensive discussion of ethnicity and religion. See *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 40, as well as the whole of Chapter 4 for a discussion of Islam in the United States, with particular focus on the Low Country.
  5. See Duncan Clinch Heyward, *Seed From Madagascar* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1937) 5.
  6. Fun fact: Several of the pieces in W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks* are set along the Altamaha.
  7. In 2004, National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Gullah/Geechee Coast, along with the entire state of Vermont, as one of its eleven "Most Endangered Historic Places in the United States." It was the first time a region had been so designated by the NTHP and the decision, in the case of the Gullah/Geechee Coast, was based upon early research from a National Park Service team that included interviews conducted throughout the coastal region in 2002, as well as a literature review that may well be the most comprehensive available. Action in the political realm followed. After falling short in 2004, bipartisan legislation sponsored by Representative James E. Clyburn and supported by Senator Lindsay Graham in 2005 succeeded in establishing a "Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor" from North Carolina to Florida. Congressmen and senators from both sides of the aisle in all affected states supported the effort. Finally, in 2006, the *Low Country Gullah/Geechee Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement* was published (in bound, CD-ROM, and downloadable formats) by the National Park Service. See <[http://www.nps.gov/sero/planning/gg\\_srs/ggsrsindex.htm](http://www.nps.gov/sero/planning/gg_srs/ggsrsindex.htm)>.